

Malaysian PM threatened with subpoena

Opposition leader goes on trial again

Charges trumped up, says Anwar

By Kevin Brown in Singapore

Anwar Ibrahim, Malaysia's embattled opposition leader, yesterday threatened to subpoena Najib Razak, the prime minister, as he went on trial for the second time in 12 years on charges of sodomy.

Mr Anwar claims the

charges have been trumped up by the government for political reasons, but faces up to 20 years in prison if he is convicted.

That would also remove him from political life, potentially damaging the three-party People's Alliance opposition coalition, which poses the most serious threat to dislodge the ruling National Front since independence from Britain in 1957.

Speaking outside the court yesterday, Mr Anwar said his lawyers intended to subpoena Mr Najib and his

wife Rosmah Mansor, alleging that they were involved in what he said was a conspiracy to have him imprisoned. Mr Najib has denied the allegations.

Mr Anwar said the presence in court of diplomatic observers from the US, Britain, the European Union, Japan and Australia demonstrated the "concern and disgust" aroused internationally by his trial.

Accompanied by two daughters and his wife, the former deputy prime minister said the prosecution was the result of "the

machinations of a dirty, corrupt few".

The proceedings are seen by many opposition supporters as part of a political fightback by Mr Najib against the People's Alliance, which won more par-

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liamentary seats than expected in 2008 elections.

Bridget Welsh, a Malaysia specialist at Singapore Management University, said "[Mr Najib] will not be able to get away from the fact that this is seen as the removal of a personal rival to him."

Ms Welsh said the prime minister "could win [politically] if the court convicts and is seen as having been fair and judicious. But it could backfire if it is seen to have crossed the line."

Mr Anwar was convicted of sodomy after his

dismissal as deputy prime minister in 1998, following a political crisis. International observers criticised the fairness of the trial, and the conviction was later overturned, although not until Mr Anwar had spent several years in prison.

Mr Najib, who became prime minister in April, has sought to stabilise the governing coalition by calling for a crackdown on corruption and reaching out to voters from the minority Indian and Chinese communities.

He has also introduced

economic reforms intended to raise Malaysia's growth rate by reversing a substantial fall in foreign direct investment since the Asian financial crisis in 1997-98.

However, the prime minister is struggling to challenge international perceptions that Malaysia is becoming more unstable as a result of political and religious confrontations.

Several churches have been attacked by arsonists after a court ruled that the Arabic word "Allah" could be used to refer to God by Malay-speaking Christians.

In a separate incident, Muslims protesting against a proposed Hindu temple trampled on a the head of a cow, sacred to Hindus.

The trial was adjourned until today after the court dismissed an application by Mr Anwar's lawyers for a review of a higher court ruling that barred access to some prosecution evidence.

Mr Anwar's lawyers say they cannot defend their client properly without access to the prosecution's medical evidence, and that access has been blocked by a series of court rulings.